

---

United Nations Commission on the Status of Women  
Fifty-seventh session  
4 - 15 March 2013  
New York

!

!

## **INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL**

**Panel on the priority theme of CSW58 (2014)  
Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the  
Millennium Development Goals for women and girls**

**GENDER EQUALITY AND POVERTY ERADICATION:  
WHAT HAS WORKED FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS?**

by

**NAILA KABEER**

Professor of Development Studies  
School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London University

!

## **Gender equality and poverty eradication: what has worked for women and girls?**

### **1. Introduction**

The Millennium Declaration was framed by a strong commitment to human rights and social justice, resolving to '*respectfully uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*' and to '*strive for the full protection and promotion ...of civil, political, economic, social and cultural*

!

agricultural sector. The later addition of access to decent and productive employment for men, women and young people was critical to MDG 1. Rising female economic activity in the non-agricultural sector cannot be taken as an unambiguous indicator of poverty reduction or of women's empowerment: what matters also are the returns to women's labour and their ability to use these returns to pursue valued goals. In the rest of this paper, we consider the implications of women's access to decent and productive employment in relation to the twin rationales outlined in the Millennium Declaration.

## **2. Gender equality, labour markets and poverty eradication: making the linkages**

A recent review of studies exploring both the impact of gender equality on economic growth as well as the impact of economic growth on gender equality reports some important findings.<sup>1</sup> Greater gender equality in education and employment was found to make a positive contribution to economic growth, a finding that appeared robust for a variety of different countries and over different time periods.<sup>2</sup> This effect appeared to operate through two pathways. The first was market-mediated and worked through ensuring that economies were drawing on a wider and more qualified pool of human resources than would be the case if women were denied access to educational and economic opportunities.

The second was family-mediated: education, income and indeed any resources which promote women's voice and agency within the family have been found to lead to higher investments in the human capital and capabilities of family members, improving the productivity of both the current and future generation of workers. This effect reflects, of course, women's responsibility for unpaid reproductive work within the domestic domain. The family-mediated impact on economic growth appeared to be far more significant in lower income countries while the market-mediated impact took on greater significance in the

!

equality, including literacy and mortality rates, *independently of economic growth rates*. It thus appears that women's education and employment act as 'structural catalysts' within the economy: not only do they emerge as important determinants of economic growth but they can also play a pivotal role in helping to translate economic growth into progress on other aspects of gender equality, and on human development more generally, thereby improving the distributional impact of growth and its impact on multidimensional poverty. Central to this catalytic role is the greater voice and agency associated with women's access to valued resources.

These studies were carried out at very broad levels of aggregation. More micro-level quantitative analysis from three very different contexts – Egypt, Ghana and Bangladesh – provides more detailed insights into the forms of employment most likely to improve women's voice and agency and hence contribute to their role as structural catalyst.<sup>4</sup> The strongest finding emerging from the analysis is that in all three contexts, women's access to formal employment was systematically more likely to enhance their voice, agency and influence both within the home and in the wider society than any other form of work. Paid work outside the home or farm, whether in self-employment or waged work, also achieved a range of empowering outcomes relative to unpaid family labour (whether in productive or reproductive activity), but less consistently than formal employment. Moreover, many of the informal outside activities available to women were poorly paid and extremely precarious so that while they might exercise greater voice and agency in many aspects of their lives, a great deal of their energy went on making ends meet. Education, location, membership in organisations and access to knowledge and information were other important factors, reinforcing or offsetting the impact of work.

### **3. Current trends in access to decent and productive employment**





!

Women's constrained options are frequently exacerbated by conditions in the wider economy. Poor infrastructure, inadequate transport systems and weak marketing channels are likely to have a greater impact on working women relative to men because of the greater constraints on their mobility. Time constraints prevent them from travelling long distances and seeking the best prices for their output. They also face a greater likelihood of sexual harassment and violence by those with market power, such as middle men and trade officials or simply by virtue of being women in public space.

### **5. Strategic options for promoting access to productive and decent employment**

The dearth of productive and decent employment – for men as well as women - is the biggest challenge for poverty eradication. It is increasingly acknowledged that strategies for broad based poverty reduction have to start with employment-centred growth. This would require broadening macroeconomic policy objectives beyond inflation control to incorporate explicit employment targets. While the contributions to the literature on inclusive growth differ in their emphasis, they share the shift away from the free market fundamentalism in favour of a more active role for the state, the need to broaden macroeconomic policy objectives beyond inflation control to incorporate explicit employment targets and policies geared to the specificities of different contexts in place of the one-size-fits-all thinking that characterised neo-liberal approaches. While states should allow markets to function without unnecessary interference, they also need to ensure the provision of public goods to enhance the productive capacity of the economy: 'the capacity to provide these public goods effectively is an important part of the social capabilities needed to generate development'.<sup>12</sup>

Increasing the volume of good jobs will not necessarily promote women's capacity to take advantage of these jobs on fairer terms. After all, women's labour force participation rates have been growing steadily in most regions of the developing world, but most remain trapped in forms of informal work that will do little to eradicate poverty or promote their voice and agency. Nor can the vast majority of these women hope to enjoy formal condition of work in the near future. a

!

!

!

civil society initiatives to promote behavioural change around gender roles, including violence against women and girls. But while

!



!

!

for work of equal value and legislation outlawing discrimination and sexual harassment within and outside the work place would have wide-ranging implications.

*Gender-aware social protection*

The periodic financial crises that have accompanied globalization

!

!

!

women leaving their jobs or refusing to work after dark, leading to a dramatic decline in female productivity.

Experience has shown the laws and policies intended to advance gender equality or women's rights do not automatically translate into concrete outcomes, particularly if they seek to transform long-established gender norms, without sustained efforts on the part of civil society actors. Civil society organizations, including many women's organisations, have frequently been the moving force that led changes in laws and policies that have sought to uphold women's rights

!